Diphtheria

What is diphtheria?
Diphtheria is an acute bacterial disease that usually affects the tonsils, throat, nose or skin. It is extremely rare in the United States.

Who gets diphtheria?
Diphtheria is most common where people live in crowded conditions. Unimmunized children under 15 years of age are likely to contract diphtheria. The disease is often found among adults whose immunization was neglected, and is most severe in unimmunized or inadequately immunized individuals.

How is diphtheria spread?
Diphtheria is transmitted to others through close contact with discharge from an infected person's nose, throat, skin, eyes and lesions.

What are the symptoms of diphtheria?
There are two types of diphtheria. One type involves the nose and throat, and the other involves the skin. Symptoms include sore throat, low-grade fever and enlarged lymph nodes located in the neck. Skin lesions may be painful, swollen and reddened.

How soon do symptoms appear?
Symptoms usually appear two to four days after infection, with a range of one to 10 days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread diphtheria?
People who are infected with the diphtheria germ may be contagious for up to two weeks, but seldom more than four weeks. If the patient is treated with appropriate antibiotics, the contagious period can be limited to less than four days.

Does past infection with diphtheria make a person immune?
Recovery from diphtheria is not always followed by lasting immunity.

Is there a vaccine for diphtheria?
Diphtheria vaccine is usually combined with tetanus vaccine and acellular pertussis vaccine to form a triple vaccine known as DTaP. This vaccine should be given at two, four, six and 15-18 months of age, and between four and six years of age. A combination of tetanus vaccine and diphtheria vaccine (Td) should be given every 10 years to maintain immunity.

How can diphtheria be prevented?
The single most effective control measure is maintaining the highest possible level of immunization in the community. Other methods of control include prompt treatment of cases and a community surveillance program.

What is the treatment for diphtheria?
Certain antibiotics, such as penicillin and erythromycin, can be prescribed for the treatment of diphtheria. A diphtheria antitoxin is also used for treatment.

What can be the effect of not being treated for diphtheria?
If diphtheria goes untreated, serious complications such as paralysis, heart failure and blood disorders may occur. Death occurs in approximately five to 10 percent of all cases.

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